

NEIGHBOUR PROGRAMME: THE MIXTURE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Neighbour Programme was initiated in 2010 by three institutions from Southeast Asia: Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand; then Indonesia joined them a year later in 2011. These institutions, which specialise in art and design, decided to develop a project about cultural exchange that aimed to reconnect art and design in the form of a dialogue and research as practice. This project also intended to include forming mutual networks to organise exchange programmes, creating cultural collisions within this mixture. Based on thought that Southeast Asia's countries have the same root of art, culture and heritage, Neighbour focused on searching a different topic each year that could be explored and developed into knowledge and understanding for both students and lecturers, and hopefully to publics about their own visual culture. Neighbour has running since 2010 and still developing until present. This project has used different methods, such as Constructivist Learning that gave new perspective of gaining knowledge; and hopefully Neighbour will keep trying to find a new method to engage art, design, and culture with publics internationally.

Keywords: project, southeast Asia, mixture, art, culture

ABSTRAK

Neighbour Programme dibentuk pada tahun 2010 oleh tiga institusi yang berasal dari Asia Tenggara: Singapura, Malaysia dan Thailand; lalu Indonesia bergabung setahun kemudian pada 2011. Institusi ini, yang khusus bergerak dalam seni dan desain, memutuskan untuk mengembangkan sebuah proyek mengenai pertukaran budaya yang bertujuan untuk menghubungkan kembali seni dan desain dalam bentuk dialog dan riset praktis. Proyek ini juga bertujuan untuk membentuk jaringan yang selaras dalam menjalankan program pertukaran, menciptakan pandangan baru dari benturan budaya. Hal ini berdasarkan pula pada pemikiran bahwa negara-negara Asia Tenggara memiliki akar budaya yang sama terkait seni, budaya dan peninggalan bersejarah, Neighbour memfokuskan diri pada pencarian topik berbeda setiap tahunnya, di mana topik tersebut dapat dieksplorasi dan dikembangkan menjadi pengetahuan dan pemahaman mengenai budaya visual bagi mahasiswa dan dosen, dan juga untuk publik itu sendiri. Neighbour telah berjalan dengan baik sejak tahun 2010 dan masih terus berkembang hingga saat ini. Proyek ini telah menggunakan metode yang berbeda dalam pelaksanaannya, antara lain sistem Constructivist Learning yang memberikan pandangan baru untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan; Neighbour juga terus berusaha untuk mencari metode baru dalam mengaitkan seni, desain dan budaya dengan publik dalam skala internasional ke depannya.

Kata kunci: proyek, asia tenggara, perpaduan, seni, budaya

INTRODUCTION

Based on the thought that Southeast Asia, as an emerging region, needs to see the urgency in creating or re-creating the relationship in between. Therefore, three institutions from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, which specialise in art and design, decided to initiate a small forum about cultural exchange in 2010. Then in 2011, Indonesia joined with the programme for the second batch. This programme is a dialogue, a research as practice project aimed at reconnecting art and design institutions in Southeast Asia. Since the participant countries are geographically close to one another, so the name Neighbour was chosen. Referred to the Oxford dictionary, the definition of *Neighbour* is 'a person living next door to,' or 'any person in need of one's help or kindness.'

Neighbour has intention to include forming mutual networks to organise exchange programmes, creating cultural collisions within this mixture. Neighbour emphasises on art and design within socio-cultural aspect, providing a non-elitist platform inviting lecturers and students from the arts and other expertise to participate, converse and respond to different ideas and dialogues local or foreign. It is a potential project for different art and design educational institutions to experiment and learn about one another. Neighbour hopes to play an important role in the future to help in the shaping and documenting of Southeast Asian culture through networking and education. It determined to see the project as: a network to encourage closer relationship; an archive for art and design education initiatives; a research as practice project on Southeast Asia's visual culture; and it could result in: an exhibition, documentation/documentary, thesis or research paper, experimentation/film/installation, and seminar/workshop.

Southeast Asia's members host this programme consecutively each year, and the theme is changing based on the host institution's decision. The students as participants with different art and design backgrounds are working together and creating wonderful outcomes that will be exhibited and opened for public. Lecturers from each organisation will accompany them during the programme as the instructors.

METHOD

This article was written using field research, observation and direct involvement method during the event. Writer was also using supporting documents that were in her possession as one of the spokesperson for this programme, such as documentary video, photographs, and also official agreement for all members. Furthermore, writer had developed all sources with additional information based on hypothesis, perspective, and also further knowledge from book and literature; then she constructed the whole ideas into written knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Neighbour is a programme that keeps developing; therefore, the organisations behind it will keep growing as well. All members have the same responsibilities in term of hosting and organising the programme every year. Started as a small forum, Neighbour developed with the name that bring vision and mission for Southeast Asia regions. However, Neighbour officially became an annual programme with clear identity since 2013. It finally had official logo that will represent the identity of Southeast Asia globally.



Gambar 1 Neighbour Programme Logo, [2013]
[source: private documentation]

The identity was created based on the basic concept of *Neighbour*: a person living next door, which related to house next door. Therefore, the research based on the house's rooftop from each country that has its own uniqueness. The logo was a combination between typography and icons with the simplified design of rooftop from traditional house in each country (perspective from above). The icons could be arranged based on layouts and needs as long as it brings the message about Southeast Asia's closeness, diversity, and togetherness.



Gambar 2 Member Organisations' Logo [2013]
[source: institution's documentation]

The members of Neighbour Programme:

- LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore [2010 to present]
- Dasein Academy of Art, Malaysia [2010 to present]
- SoA+D KMUTT, Thailand [2010 to present]
- BINUS University, Indonesia [2011 to present]

Next potential members (starting in 2014) will be Laos and Philippines.

Each institution selects participants and instructors who will join this programme every year. Students will be chosen by each institution to represent their country and they come from various art and design backgrounds study. They will work in team and collaborate with other students from different countries; these projects will enrich their knowledge and understanding about their neighbour countries.

Collaboration Overview

Neighbour has been running since 2010 with the consensus from the said collaborators in order to continue in this initiative. Through feasible adjustments and practical requirements between colleges and universities, each project is open for discussion during an “ACADEMIC FORUM.” The current tentative plan is to have students congregate at designated participating countries and take part in a workshop/event. The Neighbour team will suggest an issue or theme where the students (of different countries) will need to collaborate to propose an investigative enquiry based on the given theme. The academic institution that is playing host determines the process and running of each workshop.

Neighbour has been successfully running for three batches since it first started in 2010. The theme for each batch was different and proposed by hosted institution. Students and instructors did research and learned about visual culture in various ways. Host institution must prepare a theme that can be discussed by all students with various backgrounds study, so that they could apply the knowledge and understanding that they have got to their respective subjects of study in their hometown countries.

First Batch: Provision Shops ‘same same but different’ [2010-2011]

The first batch of Neighbour started in 2010; it was divided into two activities in two different countries: workshop/cultural activities in Bangkok, Thailand in 2010 and an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2011. The theme that they chose was **provision shops** with a tagline ‘same same but different.’ This theme was proposed by LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.



Gambar 3 Neighbour Programme Poster – 1st Batch [2010-2011]
[source: private documentation]

Provision shop or *mama shop* (Singapore) is a small store or shop that may sell everyday items; it is a local or traditional shop that was really common in Southeast Asia’s countries. Nowadays, young generations prefer to go shopping in supermarkets or modern convenience stores. Therefore, many of them did not even know about the existence of provision shops. This theme would

give them a chance to know more about traditional life of local people from different countries. They would understand the meaning of these places for different generations. Student groups were required to explore actual provision shops in Bangkok, Thailand to gather visual research on what made it special. They had to record the journey and design the narrative to communicate the similarities and differences between what they had seen in their own countries.

These would lead back to the memories of growing up. Student had to collect as much information as possible and gather actual objects that related to the brief as artefacts for the exhibition. Then they had to think about ideas: how these ideas could be transformed or reinterpreted into something current and contemporary in their own countries retaining the value that it could bring back the significant memories: concept of growing up, in the neighbourhood, provision shops as an Asian concept, nostalgia, childhood memory, popular culture, etc.



Gambar 4 Workshops and Cultural Activities, Bangkok, Thailand [2010]
[source: private documentation]

This first batch ran nicely and gave wonderful insights about visual culture and tradition in Thailand for the participants and instructors. The students came back to their hometown countries and prepare the idea and concept for the exhibition that would be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on March 2011. Neighbour participants presented three different outcomes for this project and successfully gained attention for art and design communities. The first group created a documentary video with the theme of *Nostalgia and Memory*; the second group put up their thoughts and ideas in the wall and presented their mind maps with visual approach called *Wall of Thought*; and the last group designed an installation art with the title *Provision Wall* that consisted of various types of packaging that they bought from the provision shops in their home countries.

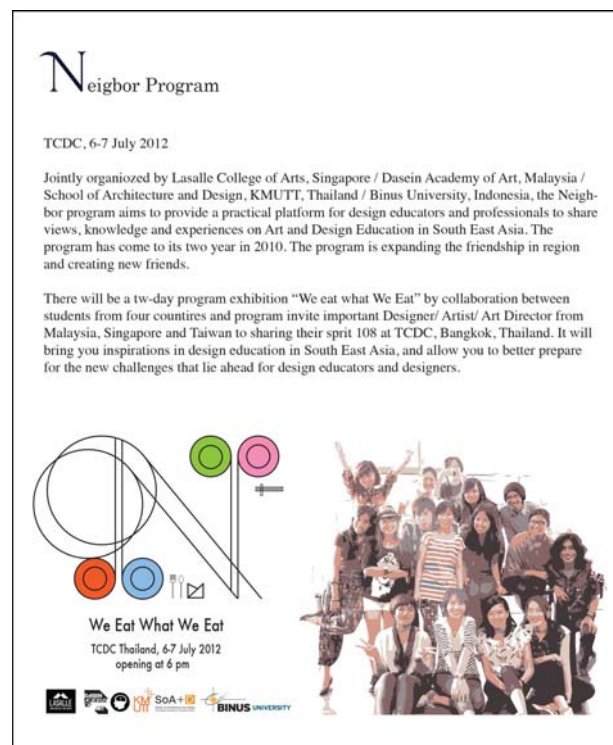


Gambar 5 The Outcomes; Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia [2011]
[source: private documentation]

With this wonderful response from the communities, Neighbour decided to continue this programme and tried to add new members from Southeast Asia, so that this programme could grow bigger and so the understanding about each other. Then in July 2011, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore asked Binus University, Indonesia to join this programme and became a new member.

Second Batch: Food Culture ‘we are what we eat’ [2011-2012]

Then in October 2011, the second batch was started and hosted by LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. This batch was also divided into two activities: workshops/cultural activities in Singapore and an exhibition that would be held in Bangkok, Thailand. The theme for the second batch was **food culture** and the tagline was ‘we are what we eat,’ which was proposed by SoA+D KMUTT, Thailand.



Gambar 6 ‘Neighbour Programme Poster – 2nd Batch’ [2011-2012]
[source: private documentation]

The theme food culture was chosen because there were a lot of things that could be explored by the students. Based on its definition, food means any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth. However, it could be seen from many different perspectives. Based on the context, food could represent nation, culture, tradition, and people. In the eyes of art and design, food could be seen as source of inspiration such as colours, shape, form, texture, structure, packaging and presentation. Therefore, this theme was suitable for all students from various background studies. They might explore from many different aspects and tried to apply it into something new that could represent Southeast Asia’s culture.

Student groups were invited to visit some places and try to taste foods, they had to find out about the ‘uniqueness’ of Singaporean foods. Students needed to gather visual research on what makes it special. They had to record the journey and design the narrative to communicate the similarities and differences between what they had seen in their own home countries. Besides the food itself, environment was also one of the key points to feel and enjoy food. Then they had to think about ideas:

how this theme could be interpreted into something that can represent togetherness of Southeast Asia. It could be formed as a visual documentary, installation, narrative in image, artefact, product, new recipe, performance, prototype/schematic design, research paper, etc.



Gambar 7 Workshops and Cultural Activities, Singapore [2011]
[source: private documentation]

During the workshop in Singapore, students explored many things and tried to experience the cultural differences. Host institution brought them to several places to try food and feel the environment. They visited *hawker centre* (a market at which individual vendors sell ready-to-eat food from small booths in Southeast Asia), enjoyed inexpensive food and felt the environment. Then the students were brought to enjoy dessert in café near the university, drink expensive coffee or tea while feeling comfortable with the environment. They got different sensation in many ways, both from the food and environment; then all participants and instructors had an open discussion about their experiences. It was about knowledge and cultural exchange that gave them wonderful insights. The students managed to create new recipes that represent all four members and their uniqueness; they also prepared presentations about their conclusion before they created artworks for the later exhibition.



Gambar 8 New Recipes' Workshops Outcomes, Singapore [2011]
[source: private documentation]



Gambar 9 Idea Presentation' Workshops Outcomes, Singapore [2011]
[source: private documentation]

The exhibition was held in Bangkok, Thailand on July 2012 and hosted by SoA+D KMUTT. The outcomes were varied and the exhibition got good response from art and design communities in Thailand. Four groups from different members created four outcomes for the exhibition: three installation arts and a board game. Besides the exhibition, Thailand also prepared international seminars about food art and food packaging design, so the students would get more information and knowledge.

The first group designed *flower crackers* an installation art from various crackers from four countries and arranged them as flowers. The second group designed an installation art called *home*, which made from paper and formed it to look like rice. They wanted to inform that the similarity of their countries was rice as the primary food, so their concept was rice as a home of Southeast Asia.



Gambar 10 The Outcomes of first and second group;
Exhibition, Bangkok, Thailand [2012]
[source: private documentation]

The third group created *plate-form of culture*, installation art made from various plates from each country. The concept was that food needs a platform and plates represent it; they also designed and created illustrations inside the plates, made images from local ingredients. The final group designed a simple board game called *guess the foods*, which was quite interactive.



Gambar 11 The Outcomes of third and fourth group;
Exhibition, Bangkok, Thailand [2012]
[source: private documentation]

Third Batch: Textiles ‘smile n weave’ [2013]

On the third batch, Neighbour was hosted in Jakarta, Indonesia by Binus University. Different from two batches before, which divided into two activities in two different countries; this time Neighbour was trying to make it more efficient by commencing all of the events at one time activity in one country for a longer time. This new strategy was proven more effective in every aspect: budget,

timeline and efficiency. This decision was acquired after long discussion between all members on September 2012 in Singapore.

Neighbour tried to combine all activities into one time event because of some problems that had occurred in the second batch. The time difference between workshops/cultural activities and exhibition was around six months before; this was not efficient. Therefore, in 2013, Neighbour Programme was held in Indonesia for all activities (workshop, cultural event and exhibition) with a range of time around two weeks. The theme for third batch was **textiles** with the tagline *smile 'n weave*, which was proposed by Binus University, Jakarta, Indonesia and also the host for this Neighbour Programme 2013. Textile was chosen as a theme because it has a strong relation with culture. Each country in Southeast Asia has its own style: motif, colour, material, etc. Neighbour could do research from many different perspectives: philosophy, history, character, and so on; then they could apply it into various art forms.



Gambar 12 Neighbour Programme Poster 3rd Batch [2013]
[source: private documentation]

All participants were invited to join the cultural activities, seminars and workshops to enhance knowledge and develop their awareness. There were two seminars about textiles: one about Batik (textiles from Indonesia) and another one about textiles in Thailand. They did the traditional *batik-stamping* and *cane-weaving* workshops; then discussed about further plan to create the artworks.



Gambar 13 Workshops and Cultural Activities, Indonesia [2013]
[source: private documentation]



Gambar 14 *Preparation for Exhibition, Indonesia* [2013]
[source: private documentation]

The exhibition was held in Jakarta, Indonesia and opened to public for a week. The students were successfully created wonderful installation arts to be exhibited. The first group created new motifs that represented four country members and applied the motifs into an installation art called *our motifs, our stories*. The second group created *whisper*, an installation art that focused on the new wave contemporary batik design that symbolised cross culture.



Gambar 15 The Outcomes of first and second group; Exhibition, Jakarta, Indonesia [2013]
[source: private documentation]

The third group designed *members*, installation art that represented unity in diversity. They used weaving technique to combine all different elements as a whole new form. Then the last group created *Home*, installation art that was inspired by Indonesian *Wayang Beber* (traditional storytelling using illustration in a roll of clothes).



Gambar 16 The Outcomes of third and fourth group;
Exhibition, Jakarta, Indonesia [2013]
[source: private documentation]

CONCLUSION

The collaboration overview has shown that Neighbour has clear objectives for visual culture development and international collaboration. The necessity to develop deeper understanding about culture in Southeast Asia has become the main focus for this programme; and since it was initiated and run by educational institutions, Neighbour is a potential method to gain interest and enhance knowledge securely without politically distrust between each country. Besides the educational institutions as an agency, choosing university's students (age 18-25) as the participant was also the right approach to develop Neighbour programme. Different from western countries – where art and design have been taught from young age – in Southeast Asia, science and economic are always the main focus of studies. Maybe that happens because most of Southeast Asia's regions are still developing. Therefore, as art and design institutions, Neighbour wants to share the importance of visual culture as main asset to develop identity of the nation globally.

Most of Southeast Asian countries are still struggling politically and economically (*hard power*), hence art and culture are needed as *soft power* to bring awareness about our existence internationally. Furthermore, by strategically accommodates its country members for discussion, research, communication that focused in developing visual culture, Neighbour managed to focus on the process. Neighbour believes that outcomes will come eventually if the experience are significance and able to stimulate creativity. Art is limitless and should be able to be interpreted in different ways for both artists and audiences.

After few years running this programme together with other institutions, I realise that Neighbour has managed to evoke the students' creativities with *constructivist learning* method. Based on the article that was written by George E Hein, constructivism term refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves. Neighbour applied this learning method unintentionally and somehow it had been successfully gaining great outcomes for both instructors and participants. As Hein pointed out, learning is a social activity: it is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings; learning involves language and it will influence our way to learn. Learning is contextual: we do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of our lives; we learn in relationship to what else we know, what we believe, our prejudices and our fears. We cannot divorce our learning from our lives.

Like what Hein said, learning is a social activity; therefore what we had tried to apply in Neighbour was a good start. Connecting students and instructors from diverse backgrounds and cultures gave them the opportunity to socialise; doing discussion and exchange knowledge had broadened their perspectives. I also agree with his statement that learning is contextual; content is really important for learning process, but if it is supported by the right context, learning content will be flawless. We would love to give understanding and experience about visual culture in Southeast Asia contextually; students will be able to create great content if they understand the context of culture. Neighbour as a platform that gives freedom to its participants so that they could construct their ways of learning. We gave the fundamental supports such as cultural activities, seminars and workshops; then students have to grab the essence and understand the context before apply the knowledge into ideas, contents or outcomes. As the result, students managed to construct their ideas into visible forms of art that had strong connection and context with Southeast Asia's cultures.

Even though Neighbour has different form compare to learning in the art and design formal education, they both have the same objective: to inspire creativity. From information that I have got from Tate's presentation by Anna Cutler – Head of Learning that stated about Tate objectives to construct ideas and deliver it explicitly to people. She also said that they want audiences to learn from the environment, so that they could reflect from experience. Actually, Neighbour does what Tate does

although it is not exactly in the same manner; we apply experimental system, divergent thinking by using imagination; we also motivate students and evoke curiosity by giving them interesting topics to discuss.

In conclusion, Neighbour has applied constructivist learning and idea of inspiring creativity to our members, therefore we need further development for our programme: involving audiences and public engagement. We have plan to develop knowledge and further understanding, and also enhance awareness about visual culture in Southeast Asia globally in the future; hence Neighbour needs to start thinking about its engagement with the visitors and audiences. We need to cleverly think about the best method to involve audiences and publics with our programme, specifically in Neighbour exhibition. We would like to grow awareness and deliver our message about Southeast Asia's visual culture, whilst the audiences feel engage with students' artworks in the exhibition. Our goal is to enhance deeper knowledge and understanding about our cultures globally.

Therefore, Neighbour will try to explore methodology to make audiences more active, so that they want to get involve with the exhibitions. Differently from students' activities, involving audiences will need different approach; Neighbour will try to design interactive displays or prepare supporting materials during the exhibition, so that the audiences and publics will gain experience and enjoy the it although they do not have art and design backgrounds. I really hope that Neighbour could develop deeper understanding about Southeast Asia's visual culture, not only for the students and instructors, but also for audiences and publics globally in the future.

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